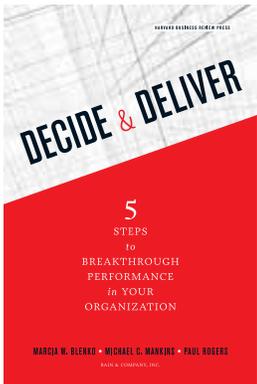# Decision Insights

How to be a better boss

By Michael Mankins and Cornelia de Ruiter

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How to be a better boss

It's a time-honored precept of good management: Teach your team members or direct reports to take on some of your responsibilities. Doing so builds their skills and expands their horizons; it also frees you up to focus on higher-order or longer-term issues.

One key to successful delegation is to coach team members on making and executing critical decisions. If people can learn the craft of decisions—making good choices, making them quickly and implementing them effectively—they will find their work far more satisfying. And your unit will be far more productive, because every decision won't depend on you.

Many people, of course, don't handle decisions well. They may act too quickly, failing to think through the options and implications. They may try to deflect responsibility or pawn off the decision on someone else, often their boss. ("Just tell me what to do, and I'll do it.") So to build your team's decision capabilities, you'll have to start from the very beginning. Here's what's involved:

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Work with your team to identify the most important decisions.

Every unit or function in an organization must make critical decisions. Some of these are big, strategic choices, such as determining the allocation of marketing dollars or choosing which IT system upgrades to buy. Others are everyday decisions that add up to a lot of value over time, such as how to handle customer service requests. A useful coaching tool is to create a *decision architecture* with your

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Hospira resets its marketing materials decisions

A few years ago, the specialty pharmaceutical and medical device company Hospira was struggling to produce good marketing materials to support its sales efforts. The process took too long, and the materials produced were not as effective as they should have been. So a team analyzed the decisions involved and reset them, using a simple What, Who, How and When approach:

What: Hospira's team realized that its primary goal wasn't just to meet Food and Drug Administration guidelines for marketing materials. Rather, it was to develop effective, compelling brochures that were FDA compliant.

Who: The team analyzed RAPID roles and found that many different functions believed they had the final say (the D) on the materials. After discussion, it assigned the D to the marketing function, with the regulatory function getting an A (meaning "must agree").

How: Before, drafts were passed from hand to hand in a manila folder. After the reset, the group began holding focused meetings to discuss the issues, and one person (the R) had responsibility for recommending the content and format for each brochure.

When: Each step in the process got its own deadline, so everyone knew where things stood and how long the development of a given brochure would take.

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team that captures your unit's critical decisions. Begin by listing all the decisions your unit must make; then winnow the list by determining which ones involve the most value and which require the most attention. Those that make the cut will be your critical decisions—the ones that absolutely must work right if your team is to be successful.

As a group, assess how those decisions are made and executed today.

Are they made in meetings, or by individuals? Do you yourself have to make most of them? Figure out not only who makes the decisions but who plays other key roles, such as creating a recommendation or offering input. Then analyze the decision-making process itself. What sort of information is required before anyone can make a decision? Do decision makers get that information at the right time and in a useful form? A good way to help team members answer these questions is to evaluate each part of the decision process. Ask them whether the decisions in question are usually right—that is, whether they typically result in the desired outcome. Ask whether they are made and executed in a timely fashion, and whether they involve too much or too little effort, given the decision's value.

Define key roles for your critical decisions going forward. Your team members may not understand that every major decision usually involves several key roles. There's the recommender, who gathers input from people with knowledge about the issue and proposes a course of action. There's often someone who must agree to the recommendation before it can go forward. There's the decision maker, and there are the people who will implement the decision. We like to assemble all these roles into an out-

of-sequence but easy-to-remember acronym—RAPID®, for Recommend, Agree, Perform, Input and Decide. Once people get used to the language, you'll find they use it easily, as in "I have the R for that decision—Sheila has the D." The common language makes it easy for the group to agree on who should play each role.

Coach team members on good decision disciplines.

Every major decision needs to be framed correctly—not "what should we do?" but "what are the best options in light of this specific goal?" A significant decision is likely to require a robust set of facts before it can be made. Gathering this information can take time—time that will need to be accounted for to keep the decision process on track. Decisions should be made according to criteria that are agreed on in advance. A leader shouldn't jump in and make a decision the first time people get stuck, but should instead reinforce his confidence in the team that they have the expertise and skills to work it out. Setting guidelines for a decision—"as long as you stay within the guidelines you have full responsibility"—will help keep escalation to a minimum. Put these disciplines together, and you can reset each major decision accordingly (see the sidebar, "Hospira resets its marketing materials decisions").

Helping people learn the craft of decisions is a significant investment of time. You will have to role model the right behaviors and decision disciplines to make sure that they stick. But coaching your team to make and execute critical decisions well not only makes you a better boss; it also leads to higher productivity and engagement. Because your people are more effective and engaged, you can focus more on the big picture than on the daily details of management. ◉

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